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ABSTRACT

A study of 16 Dominican American professors who teach in the humanities and social sciences examined the manner in which cultural legacies affected their attainment to "high literacy." Does the acquisition of a prestigious degree transform a person's life? Does it lead to social mobility, liberalism, activism, liberation? Results fall under four headings, "The Legacy of Dominican Culture," "Adjusting to American Society," "The Emigrating Experience," and "The Influence of Family and Professors." Female respondents pursued high literacy as a means of countering inequality built into their Dominican culture. While young girls were expected to play indoors rather than outdoors, this led in some cases to a refuge in books. Other respondents said they pursued high literacy as a means of countering other forms of inequality, those concerning race and class. One respondent became "highly literate" partly because she wanted to understand Dominicans' denial of class and their distinct mulatto condition, their mixture of European, Spanish, and African heritage. Findings indicate that high literacy is a double-edged sword: it is both constraining and liberating, both an instrument of conformity and an instrument of creativity. If it requires a price so dear as to induce mental breakdowns, it also results in awakenings or rebirths that, among other things, lead to a deeper understanding and renewed love of the Dominican heritage, which is usually devalued in mainstream society. (TB)

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ED 370 131

# Gender, Ethnicity, Class, and the Development of High Literacy Among Dominican Americans

Paper presented at the 1994 CCCC, Nashville, Tennessee

by

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This past Monday morning as I was driving I tuned my radio to the G. Gordon Liddy talk show right at the moment when a student called to express how frustrated he is by Feminist Studies, African-American Studies and all of the other "special" studies at his university. Liddy's answer was quick: "encourage those programs" he said, "it's a tough world out there and you're in competition. You don't want women and minorities competing with you. You don't want them to take the math and science courses that you should be taking. You don't want them to be educated. Remember, you want to eliminate your competition, so let them waste their time in those programs." Well, of course! I thought. That is precisely the ideology that has always fueled the systematic denial of literacy to marginalized groups.

The subtext of Liddy's statement and my reaction is loaded, but what I want to say right now is that Liddy charged me with an even more urgent need to examine those marginalized people who overcome such overwhelming odds and who do attain high literacy, that is, (for my purpose in this discussion) formal graduate education.[1] That's precisely what I want to do today in this

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[1]"High literacy" (which some scholars call "advanced" literacy), describes people with high abilities, "those who read Faulkner and Wittgenstein" (Venezky 3). High literacy goes beyond the mere skills required to encode and decode texts; it includes metalinguistic and metacognitive abilities, literate behavior, and in that sense can be aligned with Judith Langer's definition of "literacy as a way of thinking and speaking" and reasoning (3). This kind of literacy prompts people to extend themselves out of their immediate space and time and to imagine new and unknown worlds and ideas. It includes reflection and reformulation of their knowledge and their worlds, and

presentation; I want to tell you about a rarely mentioned group of minority people in our society: highly literate Dominican American professors who teach the humanities and social sciences in United States colleges and universities. I want to tell you about my study of them, particularly the part where my sixteen respondents reveal how Dominican cultural legacies affected their attainment of high literacy.[2]

I think such an examination helps us to acknowledge that in the United States literacy is of utmost importance, because, if for no other reason, it determines how we perceive each other.

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communicating in new ways. High literacy can also be included in what Scribner calls "literacy as a state of grace":

> In the literacy-as-a-state-of-grace concept, the power and functionality of literacy is not bounded by political or economic parameters but in a sense transcends them; the literate individual's life derives its meaning and significance from intellectual, aesthetic, and spiritual participation in the accumulated creations and knowledge of humankind, made available through the written word. (Scribner 77)

[2]It is important to note that unlike Scribner and Cole who disentangle literacy and schooling, I conflate the two, not because I think they are necessarily synonymous, but because schooling is the predominant way people acquire any level of literacy. There are probably many people who are as literate as my respondents and who have never attended university. (In fact, in Spanish when someone is described as "educated" ("educada"), it means that she has attended school <u>and</u> that she is "naturally" intelligent and well-mannered.) But since they do not have credentials, a diploma, American society does not consider them highly literate. Thus, in conflating high literacy and schooling I am enacting American society's perception of high literacy; I am defining high literacy as a set of intellectual <u>and</u> social practices.

Such and examination also helps us to see that most discussions about the nature of literacy take place in an abstract academic context, and that when focused on Hispanics/Latinos it centers on their deficiencies.

Historically, literacy has been closely linked to the distribution of power. It has been used to control, to discipline, to assimilate and to homogenize immigrants.[3] Literacy has been used as gatekeeping--as "a potent tool in maintaining the hegemony of elites and dominant classes" (Scribner 75), and as the gauge by which immigrants and

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[3]John U. Ogbu explains that minorities in the United States can be categorized into any of three stratifications: "autonomous minorities" (for example, Jews and Mormons) who manage to retain their separateness but are not totally subaltern; "immigrant minorities" (for example, Italians and Irish) who emigrate voluntarily, and experience some discrimination, but not to the extent that they are completely subordinated; and "castelike minorities" (for example, enslaved African Americans and conquered Chicanos) who are seen as inherently inferior, and are incorporated into the society involuntarily and then relegated to substandard status (232). In castelike stratification, Ogbu writes, people are "assigned to their respective groups at birth or by ascribed criteria such as skin color, and they have few options to escape that designation" (233). Although Dominican Americans emigrate voluntarily, and they have the option to return to the island, they do not fit Ogbu's definition of "immigrant minorities." My respondents' experiences indicate that Dominican Americans are "castelike minorities," because, for the most part, they are poor and undereducated dark-skinned Latinos, and therefore mainstream society groups them with African Americans and Chicanos; mainstream society finds it difficult to see them as an autonomous or an immigrant minority (the way white-skinned Cubans are viewed), even after they become highly literate. That kind of class stratification (which is clearly entwined with ethnicity) also has a direct effect on the attainment, use and repercussions of high literacy.

marginalized people are deemed "civilized," "moral," and worthy or unworthy of being melted into America. Hence, literacy in general is an extremely pertinent issue for immigrants; and high literacy specifically is relevant, since it demarcates groups even further.

Therefore, considering the specific circumstances of highly literate Dominican Americans can produce insights on the relationship between the individual and society, and the relationship between high literacy, ethnicity, gender, and class. Considering Dominican Americans' specific circumstances can clarify, for example, what happens when oppressed people acquire high literacy. Does it transform their lives? Does it lead to social mobility, liberalism, activism, and liberation? Does it produce new mental capacities and cognitive development?

Dominicans have been in the States for almost thirty years and there are still very few high literates, certainly fewer than in the Cuban American community that has been here for about the same number of years and who parallel the Dominican population at about a million.[4] Part of the problem Dominicans face in

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[4]Before Trujillo's assassination in 1961 only members of the elite and political exiles were allowed to leave the Dominican Republic. He controlled emigration to "insure abundant and cheap labor" and "to limit contact between the Dominican Republic and other countries (e.g., Cuba and Venezuela) that were experiencing agitation for democratic reforms" (Leavitt 7-8). But after his death there were two major waves of emigration to the United States: the first in the mid 1960s, the second in the mid 1970s. These waves were prompted by a series of push and pull factors: after the invasion in 1965 the U.S. made substantial new investments; industrial development displaced

becoming highly literate is that they have been and continue to be subsumed into the "Hispanic" monolith. Being subsumed is an obstacle because it assumes that all Hispanics are the same, that they have the same needs: distinct historical, linguistic, cultural and economic differences are disregarded. Hispanics/Latinos share the "minority" label, but there are vast differences among them. For example: Mexican Americans are a conquered people. Many have been in the U.S. since before the founding of Jamestown. (Some in the Southwest believe they live in occupied Mexico.) Puerto Ricans are a colonized people with American citizenship who were compelled to emigrate by the United States' attempt to industrialize the island. Cubans are political refugees. Dominicans, for the most part, are economic refugees. These unique circumstances have repercussions for the way each group functions in U.S. society.

With all of that in mind, let me tell you about some of the factors my respondents identified as facilitators in attaining high literacy, and which I categorized into four major areas: "The Legacy of Dominican Culture"; "Adjusting to American

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thousands of rural people who then crowded the cities in search of employment; economic and political conditions worsened; the United States needed cheap labor at home; both the Dominican and U.S. governments loosened emigration restrictions. This loosening was "clearly a result of a tacit agreement between the U.S. and the Republic to facilitate emigration as one method of reducing internal tensions. The U.S. beefed up its consular forces and expedited processing of visas." And once Dominicans arrived in the States, INS treated them more leniently than other immigrant groups (Spalding 54).

time. After school you had to be home, so reading and writing were to me the only entertainment." One summer Isa read the entire A volume of the World Book Encyclopedia, which was significant, as other respondents who also had the books explain, because it opened the door to the world of America, a world that they and their parents revered. Sandra explains: "My parents had a sense that America was great and that Americans knew all this wonderful stuff that they did not know. So reading World Books was exciting." The key to American knowledge "was sitting right there in the living room, and you didn't have to ask permission to visit it."

Male respondents express similar sentiments about inequity in treatment, except that instead of gender, class and ethnicity present the strongest barrier, and again, the strongest impetus for pursuing high literacy. For instance, Ramón, who has a doctorate in comparative literature, says that like most impoverished Dominicans he learned to defer to people of higher socio-economic standing. It took a great deal of effort for him to reject feelings of inferiority. He also had to unpack entrenched Dominican notions about skin color and how those notions are compounded by American views. That unpacking is part of what fueled his attainment of high literacy.

Like Ramón, Carmen became highly literate partly because she wanted to understand Dominicans' denial of class and their distinct mulatto condition. Dominicans are a mixture of European, mainly Spaniards, and African. There may be a few

"pure" whites, the result of complex factors, among them the Spaniards' obsession with lineage, and maybe even fewer mestizos (a mixture of Spanish and Indian),[5] but overwhelmingly Dominicans are mulatto. Yet, the existence of racism on the island is denied. In fact, throughout history the African influence has been elided by Spanish ideology. Dominicans have always looked to the "Madre Patria," Spain, for their roots. And although there are a myriad of shades representing, as del Castillo and Murphy write, "an extensive and rich process of contributions and cultural assimilations drawn from an extremely varied gamut of ethnic groups," Dominicans consider themselves white or mestizo (50).[6] When the color of their skin and other phenotypical traits of the African are noted, they use endless euphemisms to

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[5]Taíno Indians did not survive the Spanish conquest. The combination of hard physical labor and new diseases decimated them within thirty years of the Spaniards' arrival. When Columbus "discovered" the island in 1492 there were approximately 400,000 Taínos and by 1508 there were only 60,000 (Moya Pons 26).

[6]It is not often recognized, but a diverse group of immigrants have shaped the Dominican identity. In the past hundred and fifty years there has been an active influx of Cuban, Puerto Rican, German, Italian, Sephardic Jewish and Arabic immigrants. Cubans and Puerto Ricans contributed to education; Germans traded tobacco; Italians established commerce; Sephardic Jews were involved in financial and commercial activities; and Arabs (Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians) contributed to the retail trade (del Castillo and Murphy 55). Chinese immigrants began to set up laundries, restaurants and cafes in the early 1900s. Most recently, Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong have established supermarkets, motels, luxury hotels, and manufacturing enterprises. In fact, second to Haitians, Chinese are the largest growing immigrant group on the island (del Castillo and Murphy 56).

disguise it. They call themselves "blanco de la tierra," "Indio" or "Moreno."

On the island (and in Latin America) there is a myth that skin color is less of an obstacle when rising through the socio-economic ladder. Family name, wealth, and level of education are supposedly more important. Therefore, when Dominicans encounter racism in the States it is a totally different matter (than, for example, it is for African Americans). Ramón, for instance, had always seen himself as an "Indio," until Americans labeled him "black," and by default "African American." To this day he resists being called black (with the American connotation). Attempting to resist, and later, to understand Dominican culture's attitudes toward class and skin color motivated Ramon and others to pursue high literacy and the measure of sanctioning a doctorate provides.

Like a few other respondents, Carmen believes that her pursual of high literacy is not unusual. "I left at a moment when people in the Dominican Republic were going to university," she says.[7] And indeed, as Carmen contends (and UNESCO has

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[7]Every level of Dominican education had been ignored until 1908 when President Cáceres designated "funds for the creation of schools," thereby increasing the number of primary schools from 200 in 1904 to 526 in 1910 (Moya Pons 451, my translation). Higher education did not become a governmental priority until the 1960s, when (between 1966 and 1978) there was tremendous change. By 1978 Universidad Autónoma (the first and oldest university in the "New World"), had three branches, and eight other officially approved private institutions were created. By 1983 private universities represented 50 percent of the total student enrollment (Escala 1, 45). Accordingly, the

shown), the general illiteracy rate in the DR has been in consistent decline.[8] In 1961 Congress passed Law 5778, which defined universities as "a community of professors and students who were authorized to elaborate their own laws and regulations" (qtd. in Escala 40).[9] Subsequently, open admissions was

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student population also increased. In 1985, for example (of the country's 6.24 million total population), there were 123,748 male and female students enrolled in all post secondary education institutions. 30,892 were enrolled in business; 17,139 were enrolled in the humanities (UNESCO 1-41).

[8]Illiteracy rates in the Dominican Republic: In 1950, 57.1% of the 15+ age population was illiterate. In 1970, 33% (683,637) of the 15+ age population was illiterate: 34.6% (361,235) were females; 31.4% (322,402) were males (Wilkie 108, 196). In 1981, 31.4% of the country's total population was illiterate. Of the 5+ age population there were 1,519,198 illiterates: 30.9% (748,440) were females and 31.8% (770,758) were males. In 1990, 16.7% of the country's total population was illiterate. Of the 15+ age population there were 743,700 illiterates: 18.2% (398,100) were females and 15.2% (345,600) were males (UNESCO 1-18). (No consistent and analogous data exist.)

[9]The effort had begun in 1928 when the National Association of University Students was formed. The NAUS attempted to institute a system of governance by professors and students (Escala 38), but their work was crushed when Trujillo took control of the country on 16 August 1930. During his dictatorship all but two universities were closed. And the two left open, Universidad Autónoma and the Catholic Seminary (which was allowed to grant equivalent degrees) were converted "into a docile agent" and tool for his personal gain (Escala 40). He also "closed all but two high schools during the early years of his rule.... he did increase the total number of elementary schools" (Tancer 227).

established at Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo.[10] As a result, between 1962 and 1971 the Dominican Republic had "the largest average annual enrollment growth in higher education of any Latin American country. While the average growth for the region was 9.7%, it was 19.8% for the Dominican Republic" (Escala 41). In fact, one of the reasons many Dominicans continue to emigrate is that Dominican universities "now graduate more people than the economy can absorb" (Spalding 59; Pessar "Linkage" 1206). And so, as Carmen affirms, "Dominican culture conditions" people to pursue high literacy.[11]

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[10]Universidad Autónoma in Santo Domingo is the first and oldest university in the Americas. Pope Paul III approved its establishment as Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino on 28 October 1538, a cloistered university patterned after Universidad de Alcalá de Henares in Spain. Universidad Aquino was administered by the Dominican order. Universidad de Santiago de la Paz was established in 1558. Originally known as Colegio de Gorjón, it was chartered by the king of Spain to function as Universidad de Gorjón, a non-cloistered university patterned after the university of Salamanca. Universidad de Gorjón was administered by Jesuits. Initially women and blacks were excluded from both universities; only the sons of Spaniards and some hand-chosen Indians were allowed to attend (Gimbernard 106). These universities evolved into the two models for modern Latin American universities (Escala 37).

[11]That conditioning started with Trujillo, at least in a narrow sense. Although he closed most schools at every level, he paid "lip service" to education by establishing a special Bachillerato, a program of Arts and Letters for young women. This degree-granting program required that they complete three years of general education: English, French, Spanish, music, painting, literature, geography, history of culture, social conduct and artistic gardening (Tancer 217). Trujillo also established a school for peasant women. There they were trained to be servants for families he believed opposed him: the "raison d'etre of the school was to uncover antigovernment plots, but with the

Just as Dominican cultural heritage functions as an impediment and a facilitator, my general findings in this study reveal that the attainment, use, and implications of high literacy is a double-edge sword: it is both constraining and liberating, both an instrument of conformity and an instrument of creativity. For this group of Dominican Americans (and quite possibly for all marginalized people in the United States, as evidenced by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha) the attainment, use and consequences of high literacy requires that an immense price be paid, but innumerable compensations are also gained.

As Yolanda and her three sisters exemplify (in Julia Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents), a "cultural price-tag" has to be paid in becoming highly literate (Kaestle 116). That price is so dear that often it causes the mental "breakdowns" we see in the Garcia girls. But that same high literacy also heals. Like the Garcia girls, respondents in my study use high literacy to arrive at a new awareness of

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prompt realization of its purpose by the potential employers, an unorganized but effective boycott against its graduates" closed the school (Tancer 216). This trend toward providing vocational training for lower class women continued after Trujillo's death. In the 1970s Joaquin Balaguer supported two types of schools that continue to exist today: schools of domestic arts and industrial schools of domestic science. Schools of domestic arts "teach young women the basic necessities of keeping house, that is, cooking, sewing, and baking"; industrial schools of domestic science prepare women for employment as seamstresses and cooks (Tancer 216).

themselves, their heritage, and American society.[12] High literacy facilitates an awakening, a rebirth, that allows, among other things, for a deeper understanding and renewed love of the Dominican heritage that is usually devalued by mainstream society.

In addition to reframing how Dominican Americans see themselves, my respondents claim that high literacy also reframes how others see them. It recreates them: it gives them a more sanctioned social status; it transforms them into "successful" members of American society. And the reality is, Marina, another respondent, a sociologist, adds, that even though mainstream society marks Dominican Americans as the Other, people with Ph.D.s are "endowed" with "special" qualities. And ethnic minorities (like these Dominican Americans) who attain high literacy are often bestowed with even more special qualities: intelligence plus strength, perseverance, and conviction, for example. The point, my respondents affirm, is that becoming/being highly literate reframes how mainstream society views Dominican Americans, and in turn how Dominican Americans

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[12]That kind of transformation, as all respondents in my study illustrate, is the most notable consequence of becoming highly literate. High literacy is certainly not the only agent that induces transformation, but for these respondents it is definitely the strongest. They contend that there are tangible changes (for example, improved socio-economic condition, and therefore relief from the harshness of marginal reality; escape, women say, from patriarchal oppression), but they emphasize and delineate the intangible ones most carefully (i.e., enhancement of their mental capacities and cognitive development).

perceive themselves. Even if society considers highly literate Dominican Americans to be "tokens" and "anomalies," generally they gain a grater measure of respect and appreciation. They are deemed to be qualified, productive, engaged, and therefore more valuable human beings. Consequently, highly literate Dominican Americans begin to feel more validated and self-assured. Hence, they gain a stronger sense of themselves; they feel empowered to enact their appreciation of their Dominican heritage.[13]

Obviously, there are many more factors and concerns that I can tell you about. But my intent has been to mention the highlights in order to urge all of us to reconsider the role of gender, ethnicity, and class in the attainment and consequences of high literacy, particularly among immigrants. Such examinations reveal the experiences of specific immigrant groups in relation to the wider society, which, in turn, help us to understand and analyze, in the present and for the future, what they and society deem significant. It helps us to see the social meaning of literacy, not through the eyes of theorists, but through the eyes of the people themselves. That is valid, since it provides a vital entry point for understanding that any level

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[13]Of course, this claim might be very different if I had also interviewed non-successful respondents, unemployed Ph.Ds, for instance, or if I had interviewed Dominican Americans who have achieved the same significant measure of success and social position through means other than high literacy. I suspect that the results, the attributes attached to high literacy, would be very different. (An additional study that disentangles high literacy and "success," the way Scribner and Cole disentangle literacy and schooling, would certainly help to clarify this issue.)

of literacy is not a neutral skill.

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